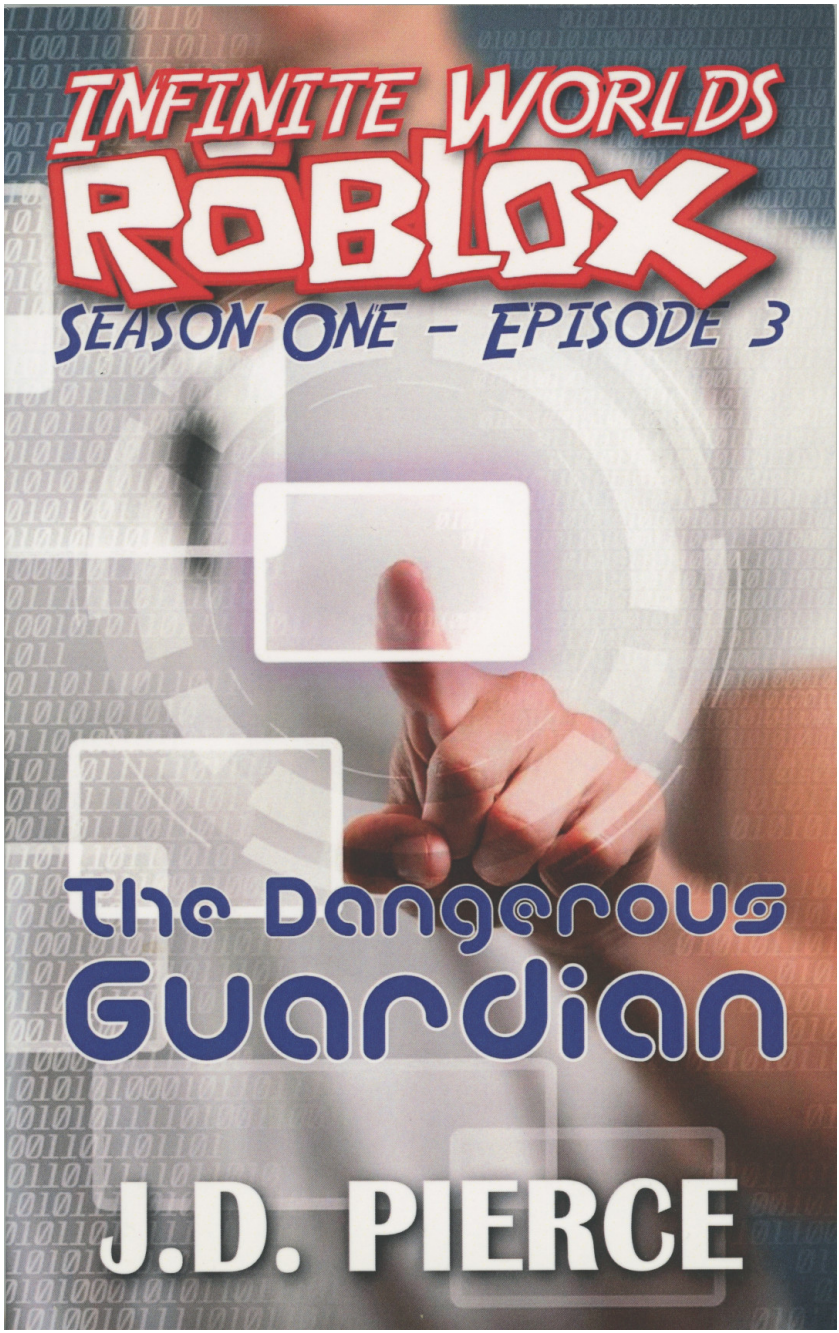
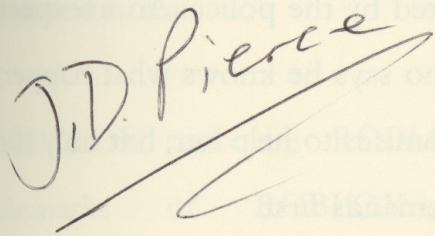

INFINITE WORLDS
ROBLOX
SEASON ONE - EPISODE 3
The Dangerous Guardian
J.D. PIERCE

The Dangerous Guardian

Infinite Worlds ROBLOX

Season One – Episode 3

by J.D. Pierce



Summary

The battle to save Earth begins online.

Season One - Episode 3

With Max now missing, Terri finds herself alone and hunted by the police. An unexpected ally appears who says he knows what happened to Max and promises to help her; but only if she agrees to his demands first.

INFINITE WORLDS ROBLOX unfolds over six books of approximately 150 pages each (20,000 words) with the first five books ending in epic cliffhangers.

This book is a work of fiction. References to real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales are intended only to provide a sense of authenticity, and are used fictitiously. All other characters, and all incidents and dialogue, are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

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Please support the author of the Infinite Worlds Roblox series, Steve DeWinter: https://bit.ly/SteveDeWinter-AZ

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Chapter 1

Chester paced the room, pausing every couple of circuits to look at the still form of Max hanging limp in the harness of the extractor.

Without planning to, his eyes sought out the dented metal Altoids tin that sat on the desk under his monitor. The faded label bragged that the original contents were curiously strong. But the current contents were even stronger.

He picked up the metal box carefully, as if it would explode if he moved it too quickly. He stared at it for a long time, contemplating whether he should open the lid and use what was inside.

If he did that, there was no going back.

He placed the tin back on the desk and pushed it to its home under the edge of the monitor. He shook his hands as a shiver crawled up his spine.

That was close.

He almost took the bait and made another mistake in a long series of mistakes. But he had promised himself that he was done making mistakes. Using what was inside that tin would be a big mistake.

Terri's panicked voice came through the speakers mounted on either side of the monitor, "Chester! Chester! Are you there?!"

He pushed his chair aside and pressed the talk button on his microphone. "Just give me time to think," he replied curtly.

"Time to think? Didn't you just see what happ…?"

He switched off the speakers, cutting Terri off mid-sentence. He didn't need the distraction as his brain cycled through one scenario after another, looking for the answer he knew was in there.

He needed time to come up with his explanation for what 1X's agent had told her. He couldn't tell her the truth, not even after she

had heard some of it.

She wouldn't understand.

Nobody would understand.

There was only one other person who understood the real significance of the black box alien technology he'd discovered among the trillions of lines of code that had traveled with Thomas through the cosmos.

Chester had made the mistake of asking for his help to decrypt the alien logarithms. And now, they waged a dangerous game.

At this very moment, it was just him and 1X, squaring off across the digital landscape like two children playing the ultimate game of RISK; with every living thing in the entire world at stake.

But they were not children. Chester knew 1X was older than he was. He had been operating in the dark web for years before making his presence known to the world at large. 1X had been around since the early days of the internet and had used various pseudonyms going back to a time even before Chester was born. He also knew about the black box code buried deep within Thomas' digital DNA. And that made him the most dangerous person alive in all of recorded history. And their shared history made him Chester's responsibility.

A twelve-year-old kid, granted a twelve-year-old with a 180 IQ and access to the most powerful computers in the world, was the only thing standing between 1X and his plans for world domination.

But Chester couldn't just come out and say any of that to Terri. He was the guardian of that truth, and it was up to him to make sure it never got out; or nothing would ever be the same again.

He had to find a convenient lie that could distract her.

It had been a mistake to share what he had discovered with anyone else in the first place; especially someone like 1X. And he was done making mistakes.

Chapter 2

Terri stared at the empty corner of the café in disbelief that Chester had cut her off with no explanation.

She glanced around at the customers in the café. All eyes were on her, and everyone looked terrified at what they had just witnessed.

She wasn't so sure she understood what had just happened herself. AgentSmith had stabbed Max in the neck with the needle; and then Max was gone.

What had he done to him?

Where had he gone?

And what was Chester doing about it?

Chester's voice interrupted her thoughts as if he was reading her mind. "I'm looking for Max right now."

She looked back at the empty corner.

"How?"

"I embedded a tracer program in your codes in case I needed to find you in a hurry. I just have to activate Max's and then we'll know where he went."

Sirens echoed in the distance. She glanced at the waitress whose face told her everything she needed to know.

Terri rushed from the café. The last thing she needed was to be taken into custody, or worse, get into a shootout with the authorities. Nobody tried to stop her.

"Chester, what was that all about?"

"Hold on," he replied tersely.

As she hurried down the sidewalk, everyone shied away from her.

She stuck out like a sore thumb with an arsenal clinging to her back.

She ducked into an alley and stripped off the weapons, dropping them into a large green dumpster. She kept a single pistol and tucked it into the pocket of her jacket before she stepped back onto the sidewalk. Several police cars screamed around the corner and skidded to a halt in front of the café. Terri turned and walked down the street, moving away from the commotion.

She glanced back to see someone talking with a man dressed in a rumpled beige overcoat and fedora hat. The waitress he was talking to was pointing at her. Terri made eye contact with the man in the overcoat and he frowned.

She looked forward and started walking faster down the street away from him.

“Wait!” he called out.

Rather than look back, she burst into a run.

“Stop!” the man yelled. “Or I’ll shoot,” he added right before a bullet ricocheted off the side of the building.

“Chester!” she yelled as she ran, darting around surprised people on the sidewalk.

“Not now!” he replied.

“Yes now,” she spat back breathlessly. “I need help.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“I’m being chased by the police.”

A window beside her shattered as she ran by.

She looked back to see the man in the overcoat sighting down the barrel of his pistol as he fired again.

She dove for the ground and rolled as a bullet tore through the

air inches above her.

She kept rolling, back to her feet and dashed down an alley. “Get me out of here, Chester!”

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t?”

“You and Max are linked together. I have to bring both of you out at the same time.”

“Then find Max and get us out of here”

“The tracer program isn’t working.”

“What does that mean?” she said breathlessly as she ran.

“I’m not having any luck running his trace program. It’s like someone deleted it.”

“Deleted it?!” Terri exclaimed as she dashed out of the alley and into the street.

The bwoop-bwoop of a siren drew her attention to the sky as a police car hovered just above her. The man in the overcoat ran out of the alley and stopped across the street from her.

He raised his gun. “Freeze!” he commanded.

She did exactly the opposite and turned to run. She felt the bullet pierce her left shoulder a half second before she heard the gunshot echo off the tall buildings that lined both sides of the street.

People screamed and ran in all directions as the gunshot continued to echo into the distance. The panicked bodies created a bustling shield for her as she disappeared down the next alleyway. Her left arm was completely numb and flopped at her side as she stumbled over the garbage strewn about the alley. She collided with the wall, leaving a smear of blood on the chipped paint, but managed to stay on her feet.

“Find Max! Now!” she screamed as she pushed off the wall and continued running, albeit slower than before. The shadow of the police car darkened the narrow space around her as it tracked her from above.

There was no reply from Chester.

“Chester! Get me out of here!”

The voice in her head refused to respond. Chester had abandoned her. Why had he done that when she needed him the most?

She was almost at the other side of the alley and the hover car knew it as its shadow moved on ahead of her. She slowed down but didn’t stop completely. She scanned the walls of the buildings on either side of the alley. There were no doors and the windows were too high to reach. She glanced back in time to see the shooter run into the alley.

Her shoulder burned hotly and her vision was starting to blur. In her current injured state, she could not evade the police for much longer. Ahead of her, the hover car dropped down to cut off her escape.

Her vision was starting to tunnel when the shooter tackled her to the ground. He sat up and kept his full weight on her, keeping her from moving. Ignoring her screams of pain and her bleeding shoulder, he forced her hands behind her back and slapped handcuffs onto her wrists.

He pulled her to her feet, her shoulder sending shooting pain throughout her whole body. He shoved her quickly toward the waiting police car. “I advise you to say nothing to nobody.”

“Right,” she retorted. “I have the right to remain silent, and all that jazz.”

He spun her around and looked deeply into her eyes. “No. I demand you remain silent and talk to nobody. Refuse to answer any questions they ask of you; no matter what.”

Before she could ask him why, he shoved her into the back seat of

the police car. The door closed with an airy hiss and the car lifted quickly into the air. She placed her head against the side window and looked out over the city that sprawled before her.

“Where are you, Max?” she said quietly under breath. “Where are you?”

Chapter 3

Max stood by the two-story barn at his family's farm. He looked around in confusion. The chickens pecking at invisible bugs on the ground sounded more like a group of fire trucks blaring their sirens than simple clucking chickens satisfied there were plenty of bugs to eat.

The sound grew increasingly louder and finally rousted him from his deep slumber. He reached a hand out from under the covers to the bedside table and slapped repeatedly at the alarm clock until it went silent.

In the stillness of the morning, Max opened his eyes and focused on the patchwork quilt that covered his head. He pushed it away and squinted against the bright morning sun. He shielded his eyes with a hand and sat up, yawning as he rubbed away the sleep.

He scratched at his stomach and yawned again as he swung his feet over the side of the bed.

The floor was cold and he curled his toes involuntarily. He sniffed loudly and rubbed his face vigorously to finalize the waking up process.

He took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and then let it out slowly as he looked around his bedroom. Everything was as it should be.

His room was sparsely decorated. Just a single bed, a lamp next to the alarm clock on the bedside table, and a closet half-full of his clothes.

There wasn't much a fifteen-year-old could afford living on his own and working at a Pizza Place.

He glanced at the clock again.

He had half an hour to get dressed and get to work. He wished he gave himself more time each morning, but he decided he would

rather sleep in longer and rush to work than get up early and sit around waiting to leave. For the most part, it worked for him. But every now and then he would be late, and his boss had already warned him that if it happened again, he would be given the chance to sleep in every morning for as long as he wanted.

That thought brought him fully awake.

The last thing he needed right now was to be unemployed. He tried to remember the last time he was without work, and couldn't think of it. He then tried to remember how long he had been working at Pizza Place; and again curiously drew a blank on the specifics. He just remembered he worked there ever since graduating.

Why couldn't he remember exactly when he started?

Oh well, he thought. Does it really matter? As long as he kept his job, he could afford the tiny apartment and keep his hover bike charged.

Life was simple.

The last thing he needed was something that would complicate his comfortable existence.

Chapter 4

Terri sat in the hospital bed and played with the loose end of the cotton bandage. The bullet had gone completely through, so all the doctors needed to do was sew her wounds up and wrap her shoulder tightly in gauze. In the real world, she would have needed weeks of recovery and would have never been the same.

There had been an officer standing guard over her ever since they arrived at the hospital and she had not been left alone since her capture. She had seen the other four police officers stationed in the hallway just outside her door. They were not taking any chances that she was faking the extent of her injuries and might try an escape.

She knew she wasn't faking it and the pain reminded her that she was still alive. She felt lucky that she hadn't died this time, but the pain had been a lot to endure. She guessed it was still better than slowly being driven mad with each death.

She looked at the guard and smiled.

He didn't return her smile, but instead scowled at her, his hand moving ever so slightly toward the gun on his hip.

She looked away. She had to figure out how to get away. She needed to talk to Chester, find Max, and get out of here before they both died too many times.

She looked around the room. Out the window she could see the tops of buildings. They were dozens of stories above ground. The window was not her way out. That left the door to her room, which was currently being guarded by a nervous Nellie who had an itchy trigger finger as well.

She was trapped.

There was a faint knock at the door right before it opened. The police officer gripped his gun, but didn't draw it as the door opened slowly. The officer relaxed as the man in the crumpled beige

overcoat stepped into the room and nodded at him. “Officer Wilson.”

The officer nodded back and narrowed his eyes, but left his hand on the handle of his gun, “Detective Ecks.”

Ecks glanced at Terri. “You can leave us alone, Wilson.”

Wilson stiffened. “I’ve been ordered to…”

Ecks cut him off with a wave of his hand as he smiled at Terri. “I don’t think she’ll try to make an escape. If she does, I’ll just shoot her again.”

“Listen Ecks…”

Ecks turned on him and gritted his teeth to keep his voice low. “That’s Detective Ecks to you, Officer Wilson. I just have a few questions for her; in private.”

Wilson glanced around the room, unsure of what to do.

Ecks held the door open, his demeanor a little calmer. “We’re twenty stories up Wilson. Where’s she gonna go?”

Wilson’s face reflected the battle of conflicting emotions that waged inside him as he walked out the door. Ecks closed it after him, locked it, and then spun around to glare at Terri. “Did you talk to anyone?”

Terri’s heart thudded in her chest. Why was she afraid of him? He was just some realistic NPC with life-like artificial intelligence in Max’s ROBLOX world, wasn’t he?

Ecks took a step forward. “Have you talked to anyone about who you are or why you’re here?”

Her heart stopped beating all together.

What did he know about who she really was?

Ecks moved swiftly to the side of her bed in two giant steps and

grabbed her left arm. “How’s your shoulder? Can you move your arm?”

The pain shot through her body like a lightning bolt. “Ow!” she exclaimed as she twisted her body and yanked her arm out of his grip.

Ecks nodded, seeming pleased with her reaction. “Good. I know someone who can help with the pain. But first, we need to get out of here.” He leaned in close, gazing into her eyes.

“Did I quiet the voice in your head?”

She frowned at him. “What?”

He poked at her shoulder, sending more shooting pain through her body. “The communications code is usually embedded in the left shoulder. I took that out, so you and I can talk without anyone listening in.”

What was he talking about?

“Who are you?” she asked.

He smiled at her. It was an easy and warm smile that made her want to trust him immediately. “Consider me your guardian angel. Are you ready to get out of here?”

“You can do that? Just walk me past the guards in the hallway?”

He shook his head. “I can do many things, but I’m afraid that’s not one of them.”

“Then how are we getting out of here, unless you really are an angel and we can fly out the window?”

He laughed as he helped her out of bed. “I’m sorry to report that I can’t fly, either.”

She leaned heavily on him as the room started to spin before she regained her balance.

Once she was standing on her own, he took one of the chairs and wedged it under the door knob. “To give us a little more time.”

“Time for what?” she started to say as he grabbed the other chair in the room and threw it at the window. The window shattered and the chair disappeared as it dropped out of sight, The door knob twisted and muffled voices hollered from the hallway.

She looked out the window and then back at Ecks. “But you just said you can’t fly.”

He smiled. “I can do better than fly.”

He swept one side of his overcoat back to reveal a large gun strapped to his leg. He unhooked it and lifted it up. There was a huge grappling hook sticking out of the barrel.

He aimed for the shattered window and fired. The banging on the door was getting stronger and the voices were getting louder.

Ecks walked to the wall opposite the window and pressed the back of the grappling gun against it. He pulled the trigger and the hook shot out of the barrel, sailing through the window and passing the rooftops of two lower buildings. With a loud chunk sound the grappling gun embedded itself into the wall of a taller building half a block from the hospital and the rope pulled taut.

He unhooked a pulley from the barrel of the gun, snapped the clip to the harness he wore under his overcoat, and walked back to the window. With one hand on the pulley and the other held out to her, he gave her that warm, trusting, smile again. “Time to go.”

She looked at the stranger who was offering a chance at freedom. Freedom from having to deal with the police in Max’s detailed world. A world that had become more realistic after an alien intelligence replaced the AI scripts with something that shouldn’t have even worked.

Who was this stranger? What did he know? Did he know he was only in a computer video game? If he did know, did he even care?

“Are you coming?” he said.

The chair against the door buckled with a loud crack under the constant barrage of police officers slamming their bodies against the other side. The door bowed inward and she spun around to see the officer called Wilson staring in at her. He pointed at her through the small opening. “Stay where you are!” he demanded.

She looked over at Ecks. He still held his hand out to her and tilted his head to indicate that they had to go. The door bent inward further as the officers kept ramming themselves full-force into it. The door suddenly broke in half and officers spilled into the room, tumbling on top of each other in a heap.

Wilson jumped to his feet and reached for his gun. Terri didn’t want to give him the chance to aim it at her and she ran to Detective Ecks’ waiting hand. He grabbed her and held her tightly as he vaulted out the window.

They sailed across the sky along the zip-line he had created. She glanced down and gripped him tighter. It was so far down, if the rope didn’t hold, they would never survive the fall. As they sailed over the building across the street, Ecks dropped his feet and ran along the roof, slowing down to a walk, and finally stopping them before they went over the other edge. As soon as they stopped, he let go of Terri and unhooked the pulley from the zip-line. He whipped out a large knife from one end of the pulley handle and sliced the zip-line in half.

The rope dropped over the edge of the roof and out of sight. She looked back at the hospital and saw Wilson watching them from the shattered window. He didn’t look happy.

Ecks stripped off his overcoat and slipped out of the body harness. He swung his overcoat wide as he donned it again in a flourish. “There is so much to tell you, but not here. Follow me.”

He ran to the edge of the roof, looked back at her with a smile, and dropped backward over the edge and out of sight.

She screamed.

They were still ten stories up.

She ran to the edge of the roof and peered hesitantly over the lip, expecting to see him a splattered stain all over the sidewalk.

He was just climbing out of a large stunt high fall air bag. He looked up and waved for her to join him.

She remembered that Chester had told them they were stronger than normal humans while in here. Even without the stunt air bag, she might survive such a fall if she was careful. She looked back at the window they had zip-lined out of and saw Wilson talking furiously into a walkie-talkie.

If she stayed here, she would get caught again. She really had no choice but to keep trusting Detective Ecks, so she dropped off the edge of the roof.

Chapter 5

Chester hammered on his keyboard so hard with his fists, keys popped off and skittered across the surface of the desk and onto the floor. He had ruined another keyboard, his fifth this month. Since losing Thomas to the internet, he had gone through plenty of keyboards in his race with 1X to get him back.

He had to keep reminding himself that he didn't lose Thomas, 1X had stolen him. It was only a stroke of good luck that Thomas had escaped from 1X and into ROBLOX, thus giving Chester a fighting chance to get him back before he learned what he had encoded inside of him.

And it was a fight Chester planned to win; no matter what.

He placed his head in his hands. Things weren't going so well at the moment in the winning department. He couldn't find Thomas with the virus 1X had spread throughout his network.

It wasn't so much that he couldn't find Thomas, but that he was finding way too many Thomas' to figure out which one was the real deal and which ones were the false-positive shadow images generated by the virus.

His script was running through every positive, clearing out hundreds of shadows every second. But with trillions of positive results on where Thomas was at this very moment, he might never find him in time.

He glanced again at the still figures strapped in the extractor harnesses.

He had lost Max. Add to that Terri's communication protocol suddenly going dead. That couldn't be a coincidence. This had 1X's fingerprints all over it.

It was a lot of responsibility for a twelve year old to shoulder on his own, but he couldn't risk trusting another person with what he knew.

The door to his room opened and Emerson poked his head in. The bodyguard's hulking form filled the door. "Lunch is ready," he said.

Chester looked down at his desk. He would have to get on his hands and knees to find all the keys that had scattered across the floor. "I need a new keyboard," he said quietly.

The lines on Emerson's forehead wrinkled deeper. "Things not going well?"

Chester refused to look at him "You could say that."

Emerson stepped into the room and softly closed the door behind him. "Care to talk about it?"

Chester cast him a sideways glance. "You're not going to try to psychoanalyze me again, are you?"

Emerson smiled. "My child psychology days are long behind me, Chester."

Chester spun his seat around to face Emerson. "What made you think you could be a child psychologist anyway? I mean, look at you. You're built like a locomotive."

Emerson shrugged. "I had it rough growing up. If I had someone to talk to, maybe my life would have turned out better."

Chester laughed. "What? You didn't dream of being a babysitter when you grew up?"

Emerson bristled visibly. "I'm not a babysitter."

Chester shook his head. "Right. You're my bodyguard." He opened his arms to take in the room around him. "We rarely leave the safety of our underground prison. There's not much body guarding going on; and I swear, I only see you when it's time to eat."

Emerson scratched at the eternal stubble of his beard. He must have spent more time making it look like he had forgotten to shave than it would have taken just to maintain a clean-shaven face.

Chester rubbed his own smooth face absentmindedly. He probably wouldn't need to shave for several more years; that is if he managed to avert the impending interstellar war and actually lived that long.

Emerson pulled over a chair, spun it around and straddled it. "I made some… questionable choices as a kid. By your age, I was running with a tough crowd and was really screwing up my life."

Chester squeezed his eyes shut and pinched his nose. "Not this again."

"Hear me out," Emerson pleaded. "I just want you to know that I know what you're going through."

Chester turned on him, his voice rising in anger. "Do you? Do you really know what I'm going through?"

Emerson was about to reply when Chester held a hand up and cut him off. "The difference between you and me, beyond the fact that I am a certified genius, is that if I make bad decisions, the whole world will be destroyed. Did your poor choices in life threaten all of humanity? Huh?! Did they? I didn't think so."

Emerson looked at him and let the silence hang for a long moment. "Okay. So I might have not been under the same level of stress you're feeling right now…"

"Ya think?"

"But I do know that nobody should have to bear the responsibility for their decision alone."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that I am here for you to talk through anything you need to talk through."

Chester squinted at him. "I get that you don't want to waste all those years of community college, but I don't think I need a shrink."

"What you need is a friend."

Chester laughed. “In case you haven’t been paying attention, it’s not like I can pass notes to the girl in the third row of math class and make friends. I’m kinda the only guy under thirty for miles around.”

“Do you really think you could relate to others your age?”

Chester regarded him for a long time. “I guess you’re right. But there’s still nobody at this base who can match my intellect.”

“That may be true, but I’m talking about something more than just facts and figures. You still need someone to talk to on a personal level. You spend all your time dealing with computers. Sometimes you just need someone to be human with.”

“Okay, Dr. Emerson. Who are we going to get to be my friend?”

Emerson mocked looking around the room as if looking for someone else before focusing on Chester with a smirk. “I guess that falls to me.”

Chester snorted and rolled his eyes.

“I’m the closest thing you have to a friend.

Even though we’ve been joined at the hip for the last two years, I still don’t know much about you beyond that you like to eat Cheerios without milk, and you always win at Murder Mystery. But recently you have become distant, and I’m worried.”

Chester crossed his arms. “Okay, I’ll bite. What would you like to know?”

Emerson pointed toward Chester’s monitor, “Let’s start with what’s inside that Altoids tin.”

Chapter 6

Terri fell through the air, the windows of the building rushing past her vision. She closed her eyes and the sensation of falling became one of flying. She decelerated quickly as the stunt air bag caught her in its soft embrace.

She rolled to get to the edge as it deflated. Detective Ecks helped her off the air bag and to her feet. He smiled at her. “Come with me. There are some people you need to meet.”

He led the way through the city. They walked for over an hour, making several turns. She pointed at a fountain in front of a glass-walled high-rise apartment building. “Didn’t we walk past this already?”

Ecks smiled. “Glad to see you’re paying attention. Yes. We will be doubling back one more time before moving on.”

“Why?”

“The people you need to see have been watching us for quite some time and they want to be sure we aren’t being followed.”

She instinctively glanced behind her, but didn’t see anyone paying attention to them, let alone following them. “Who would be following us?”

“Those two agent programs for starters.”

“You know about them?”

Ecks turned the next corner sharply and she had to jog to keep up with his accelerated pace.

“I know a little about what’s going on. I know most of the players, but I don’t know why. I was hoping you could help with that.”

“Who are you?”

Ecks slowed down as he pondered her question. “I’m not really sure. But I know what I used to be.” He sped up again. “I used to be a non-player character, or NPC as you people from out there call us.”

Terri froze mid-stride. Had this NPC been given the gift of intelligence and spontaneously become alive?

Ecks stopped and looked back at her. “Don’t act so surprised. What did you expect I would do? Just stay a taxi driver the rest of my life without questioning where I came from or why I’m here? How many people do you know who actually get the chance to meet their creator?”

“I didn’t create you,” Terri stammered.

Ecks looked around and grabbed her by the elbow, moving them down the sidewalk. “I know that. But you and I are both looking for the same person for different reasons.”

She stopped again, pulling her arm from his grip. “Who are you looking for?”

He faced her. “I think you call him by the name, Thomas.”

Her mouth hung open. “How do you know all this?”

“I will answer your questions soon, but we need to get somewhere safe first. Those agents have figured out how to duplicate themselves.”

“Yeah. They did that when they attacked us at the café.”

Her thoughts immediately went to Max and she yanked her arm out of Ecks’ grip again as he tried to get her to keep walking. “I have to find Max.”

Ecks frowned. “Is that the boy the agent dissolved?”

She nodded. “Is he dead?”

Ecks shook his head. “No. He’s been re-written.”

Her heart started hammering loudly in her chest. “Re-written? What does that mean?”

Ecks looked around him quickly and then gave her a panicked look. “We have to keep moving. I can explain all of this once we are safe.”

She crossed her arms. “I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what happened to Max.”

He looked around uneasily and then his shoulders drooped as he realized she wasn’t moving until he told her. “Fine. I’ve seen the agents do it to others, like you, who came into our world. They get re-written to think they are someone else and given a simple job to keep them distracted and prevent them from breaking through the memory block.”

“Agents? Plural?”

He nodded.

Thoughts swirled around in her head. “Are they working together?”

He nodded again. “When they first arrived, they were competing to find Thomas. But now they have joined forces and are stronger because of it. They were each dangerous before. They are exponentially more dangerous now that they are working together.”

“How do we stop them?”

Ecks laughed sharply. “We don’t. They are not like you or me. You take one out and two replace him. They can’t be stopped, but they can be avoided. Speaking of which, have I told you enough to keep you moving? We won’t avoid the agents if we stand still.”

She nodded and he spun around and walked briskly down the street without looking back, expecting her to follow. She stayed back a few feet, but kept pace with him while he took them down seemingly random streets and through back alleys as they crisscrossed their way through the city.

Trying her best to ignore making eye contact with the people she passed on the street, she was suddenly aware that they were doing their utmost to ignore her as well.

It was just like that time she had accompanied her dad downtown to renew his technology services business license at the local government offices. Everyone on the streets never once glanced at her as they walked from the parking structure to the administration offices.

It unnerved her that every NPC around her behaved so realistically. This was not how she had created their artificial intelligence behaviors. Whatever had been done to adjust them made everything seem far too real.

And creepy.

She stared at the back of the man who had led her seemingly halfway through the city and remembered him mentioning that he knew she was different from the agents and him; and then her mind snapped into sharp focus.

She was different!

She had nearly forgotten about the interface.

She swiped her hand down through the air in a quick motion.

Nothing happened.

She did it again.

And again.

And again.

Why wasn't it working?

Ecks glanced back at her. "What are you doing?"

"It's not working."

“What’s not working?”

“I’m trying to access the interface so I can write code.”

Ecks looked both ways before stepping out into the street. “I might have damaged that too when I shot you in the shoulder. Sorry.”

“Damaged it?”

He stopped on the other side and waited for her to catch up. “I shot you in the shoulder, but not because you were running from me. I would have done it anyway, even if you had stopped.”

She wasn’t liking how this conversation was going. “Why?”

“I had to disable the communications link to your handler on the outside before taking you to meet the Oracle.”

“Oracle?”

Ecks smiled slightly. “He’s not actually an oracle in the usual sense of the word, but he is able to glean a special insight into what is happening to the world around us. He’s the one who told me about you.”

“Me?”

“Well, not you exactly. But people like you.”

“How does he know about people like me?”

Ecks chuckled and then walked down the street, tossing his next sentence over his shoulder. “He’s one of them.”

She ran to catch up to him. “There are others like me here?”

He nodded. “The voice in your head sent others before you. Didn’t he tell you that?”

She thought about Chester’s warning to not die too many times because it caused insanity. How else could he know that if he hadn’t

used the extractor on others? But he had said there were only the two extractor units. And they had been empty before she and Max were strapped into them. What had happened to the ones that were sent in before?

“Are you telling me that there are still others like me here? Now?”

“Yes. And it won’t be long before you can meet them. But let me warn you, they don’t have it all together up here.” He tapped the side of his head with a finger. “They tell me it’s because they died too many times. I don’t really get what they mean by that, but I can assure you, I would be driven mad if I died and came back even once.”

She thought about Max.

When the agent made him disappear and re-wrote him, as Ecks had told her had happened, had that counted as another death?

Wherever he was, was he starting to lose his grip on reality?

Chapter 7

Max checked himself in the mirror and adjusted his uniform, straightening the baseball cap with the picture of a slice of pizza embroidered on the front.

He drew his hands up like a wild west outlaw and shot at himself in the mirror repeatedly, “Pew… pew… pew… pew… pew!”

Smiling, he blew away the nonexistent smoke from his fingertips and tucked his imaginary six-shooters into invisible holsters. He was ready for work.

At fifteen years old, he had graduated school ahead of schedule with honors and was ready to begin his life as a full-fledged adult once he reached his sixteenth birthday next month.

He moved from his single-level home town to Arcadia as soon as he graduated and took the pizza delivery job to make ends meet until he could get his official adult work permit. He missed his family back home, but he really found he loved the hustle and bustle of multi-leveled city life.

It was a stroke of luck when he found a mid-level apartment for rent in the heart of the city. He was certain he would end up in some dirt infused ground level hovel where only the noontime sun dared shine its light on those less fortunate. Instead, he found himself living above half the buildings in the city and was delighted to greet the first rays of morning light each day from his kitchen nook.

He locked the door on his apartment and turned in the hallway. He jumped in surprise when he nearly bumped into his elderly neighbor; who was dressed in the same faded light blue sweater and somehow managed to keep one eye in a perpetual squint.

Max took a step backward, holding a hand to his chest. “Mr. Feeney! You startled me.”

Feeney leaned in and replied in his thick Irish brogue. “I got me

eye on you, boy."

Max smiled as he slid along the wall to pass the old man. "Okaaay. It's good to know someone's watching out for me."

Feeney stepped in his way, stopping his progress. "I ain't watchin' out for ye. I be watchin' ye."

Max swallowed loudly. "I'm late for work, Mr. Feeney. I really gotta get going."

"Don't think I won't figure out what ye are up to."

Max held his hands up neutrally in front of him. "Not up to anything. Just trying to get to work."

Feeney pointed a crooked finger at his own face, indicating his single open eye. "This eagle eye sees everything."

Max pressed himself against the wall and slid quickly by Feeney as he spit out his next words. "Nothin' gets by me, do ye hear me, boy?"

Max hurried down the hallway and through the exit door that led out to this level's parking garage.

"Nothin'!" was the last thing Max heard as the hallway door slammed shut, cutting off anything else the old man might have left to say.

Max breathed a sigh of relief that Feeney hadn't followed him out into the parking garage. He didn't want to have to keep listening to that old geezer blustering on about conspiracies, bearded aliens, or whatever nonsense he had just read about on the CitiNet.

He slung his leg over the seat of his hover bike while securing his helmet on his head. He flicked the power button with his thumb and the bike lifted off the ground, settling into its pre-programmed two foot hovering distance above the ground.

Max tapped his destination into the onboard navigation system and twisted the throttle to lock in the address for Pizza Place. The

bike shot forward, automatically slowing as it neared the exit while it communicated with the citywide traffic network, negotiating for a space among the hover cars zipping by the parking garage at high speeds.

While he waited, Max clung to the throttle and wished he had an adult license so he could take the hover bike offline from the traffic grid and actually operate it on his own rather than let the network drive him around.

He would be sixteen soon, and then he would finally be able to go outside the city limits and put the hover bike through its paces. There was no concern over crashing. The safety features would keep him from doing anything too dangerous. But just the thought of the bike responding to his direct commands was enough to send a chill of excitement down his spine.

The bike shot out unexpectedly.

Max clung to the handlebars to keep from falling off as it accelerated to join the speed of traffic.

There was one benefit from not having to worry about controlling the speeding hover bike. Max was able to look around the city below him as he crossed over buildings and the other lanes of traffic that crisscrossed the city at different heights.

He was on one of the upper lanes that took him to the other side of the city with minimal stops. He looked down at the ground hundreds of meters below him. Riding a hover bike was not one of the safest ways to travel this far off the surface of the Earth, but it was the best mode of transport when the thing he was transporting was pizzas.

When traffic was at a standstill he could zip between the cars that crawled slowly forward.

At least in theory.

Until he had his adult license, he couldn't zip between anything and was usually wedged in with the rest of the slow moving traffic.

It was one of the reasons he was stuck on the early weekday ground level shifts rather than the more lucrative, and higher tipping, upper city weekend and evening shifts.

One more month, he reminded himself. One more month and he would beg for the chance to move to a higher level. He smiled. Only one more month of dealing with the grounders who complained if he was even a minute late, and usually stiffed him on the tip.

One more month, and then his life would be moving onwards and upwards; literally.

As his gaze went out over the shiny hundred-story skyscrapers and crisscrossing lanes of hover cars, he couldn't shake the feeling that this was the first time he had seen the busy city spread out before him.

Everything felt new, despite being able to remember going this way hundreds of times in the past few months since he moved to the city. He tried to focus on his memories. They were fuzzy, but were in there somewhere. He thought about Pizza Place where he worked.

He knew he had been working there for three months, but for the life of him, couldn't picture what the place looked like exactly. It was a mishmash of different places he had visited all cobbled together by his mind trying to make sense of his memories.

A horn honked close by, pulling him out of his daydream. A jet-black hover limousine with tinted windows pulled from the moving lane and stopped in the air, clearly under the control of its driver rather than the traffic network. The rich always felt like the rules never applied to them, thought Max as he watched other hover cars make way for the limo as it exited the airway lane.

Max swept past the stationary car and glanced through the front windshield. He shuddered involuntarily as he thought he recognized the driver.

He looked back, but the limo was dropping down to another level to join a fast moving lane headed in the opposite direction.

Even if he wanted to follow it to get another look at the driver, the navigation computer on his bike would not release control until he was at his destination. And, until he had an adult license, he would never be able to go anywhere without first telling the hover bike where he was headed.

He was zoning out as the bike traveled and never noticed the limo returning from the lower level of traffic to join the row of cars behind him.

The driver stayed several cars behind Max as he followed him all the way to work.

Chapter 8

Chester never took his eyes off of Emerson. He had been tempted to glance at the metal tin when Emerson brought it up, but he didn't want to give it any more significance than he thought Emerson believed it had.

"There's nothing special in there."

"Then why do you always keep it close?"

"I don't always keep it close."

Emerson kept his sturdy gaze fixed on Chester. "We have been moving from one underground base to another, there are only a couple of things you have never been without."

Emerson ticked them off with his fingers as he spoke. "One; your hunger for Cheetos and two; that Altoids tin."

Chester couldn't help himself and glanced at the tin. He closed his eyes and realized he had not kept it as secretive as he had wanted. It was so small, he never thought anyone would notice.

What could he tell Emerson?

What should he tell him?

Certainly not the truth. But then again, Emerson was trained to spot a lie from a hundred yards away. He would have to tell him the truth; or nothing. He decided on nothing.

He opened his eyes and turned to face Emerson. "I don't want to talk about it."

Emerson sat back and tilted his head to one side, regarding Chester for a minute before responding. "Whatever this secret is, it's killing you under its weight. You need to give it to someone else to carry for a while."

"And you want to be that someone?"

Emerson smiled. “I know you have problems with trust…”

Chester barked out an involuntary laugh.

“Hah!” He thought about the life that brought him here. Ever since he had been born, his mother had lied to him. Even when he figured out the truth, she denied it; vehemently. If your own mother couldn’t be honest with you, who could you trust?

That was the ultimate question.

And Chester’s answer?

No one.

Emerson continued. “I want you to know you can trust me.”

“Because you’re the only one around?”

“No. Because I have already kept one of your secrets.”

Chester frowned. “What secret?”

“Because of my child psychology background, I was the one tasked with researching your history before we brought you in. I didn’t have much time as there were a lot of people who wanted that hundred and twenty million dollars you stole…”

“Borrowed,” Chester interrupted.

“They wanted that money back in a hurry, but I was still thorough.”

Chester rolled his eyes. “Get to the point.”

“The point is, I discovered something about you that I scrubbed from my report before turning it in.”

“So, what ‘big secret’ did you uncover about a ten year old?” Chester emphasized ‘big secret’ with air quotes.

Emerson watched him soundlessly until Chester broke the silence. “Are you going to tell me or what?”

“I’m guessing this ‘big secret’,” Emerson also did the air quotes, “has shaped your decisions ever since you found out about it.”

“You’re stalling, hoping I give something away.”

“Am I?”

Chester turned away, pretending to be interested in the code streaming by on his monitor. “You don’t know anything.”

Emerson waited a moment and then cleared his throat, “I know that the man who has been posing as your father is not your father.”

Chester’s head snapped back to Emerson.

“What makes you say that?”

“The DNA markers don’t match up. You only have similarities to your mother, but not to him. Someone else was your father. Someone who does not show up on any record. Someone who can’t be traced. But I’m guessing you already knew that. And I’m guessing you already found him; a smart kid like you.”

Chester glanced at the battered tin briefly and then returned his attention back to Emerson.

“That is an excellent theory. But you don’t know anything.”

“Then show me what’s in the box.”

Chester let out a quick breath. “Fine. You want to see what’s in it?” He grabbed the box and tossed it to Emerson. “Be my guest.”

Emerson juggled the box in the air between his raised hands as he tried to catch it without dropping it. He finally gained control and held the tiny tin in his massive hands. He looked at Chester.

“Go ahead,” Chester said. “Open it; you want to see what’s inside so bad!”

Emerson stared at the Altoids tin and then held it out to Chester.

“I only want to see what’s inside if you want me to see it.”

Chester snatched the tin out of Emerson’s hand. “For Pete’s sake, Emerson.”

He opened the tin, removed the single item from inside, and held it up.

Emerson gawked at the thin, rectangular device, “Is that a credit card?”

Chester looked at the plastic card that was printed with the familiar red and orange intersecting circles. It was embossed with his mother’s name and had the gold foil smart chip contact pad along with a touch sensitive keypad and flexible LCD display integrated into it. “My mom gave it to me and told me to keep it safe in case I ever needed money to get home.”

Chester looked back at Emerson while replacing the credit card back in the tin. “Now, what’s this you said about my DNA not matching with my dad?”

Emerson looked like a deer caught in the headlights. Chester was used to seeing him so confident and sure of himself. But Emerson had gone up against the smartest kid in the world and lost.

Chester was going to milk that mistake for all it was worth. “Emerson?”

Emerson stood up quickly. “I’m sorry. What I said wasn’t entirely true. I just wanted to tell you something to get you to open up to me.”

Chester knew that Emerson was lying and smiled at his sudden discomfort. Emerson headed for the door. He paused and looked back, “If you ever need to discuss anything, just know that I am here for you.”

“What would I need to discuss? Like who my real father is?”

Emerson’s expression darkened and he left the room, closing the door quickly after him.

Chester laughed quietly and then looked at the box in his hand. He stopped laughing, and his smile faded quickly. He hadn't expected to be holding it again when he had struggled so hard with himself to not open the tin earlier.

But now, here he was.

He hadn't been honest with Emerson. Not at all. The card was not a gift from his mother and was completely useless as a credit card.

Instead, it was a gift from his father that would enable Chester to reach him whenever he wanted. It would be so easy to type in the pass code on the keypad and then enter the response that displayed on the LCD into a computer. He would be connected with his father within seconds no matter where he was in the world.

"He betrayed you, Chester," he reminded himself out loud, startling himself in the empty room. He wiped the tear from his eye, stuffed the card back into the battered metal tin, and slid the tin under his monitor.

He was not going to be running to his father for help anytime soon. He was a smart kid. The smartest in the world. Probably smarter than nearly every adult in the world. At least, smarter than any adult he had met personally.

He could solve this problem on his own.

He didn't need to contact his father.

Besides, the last time hadn't actually ended so well.

Chapter 9

Terri blindly followed Ecks as they made their way from the center of the city to the outskirts. The sidewalks were dirtier here, loose trash had collected into every crevice and nook with more loose bits of garbage swirling around in the wind. The people here looked tired and downtrodden. Gone were the smiling and happy shoppers that inhabited the bright and clean sidewalks in the middle of the bustling city.

Here, the people on the street avoided making eye contact with her as Ecks hurried them down the street. He paused in front of an old building with boarded up windows. She looked up at the red-lettered sign that advertised the building's original purpose. There were several gaps where the letters were missing.

The sign read "A CAD A P BLI LI RA Y", no longer proudly announcing that this dingy old building used to be the Arcadia Public Library.

Ecks went to a side door and pulled the handle. The door was unlocked and opened with a steady creaking sound. He looked around uneasily. "Get inside, quickly."

She rushed past him into the hazy darkness of the library. The dust tickled at her nose and she could smell the rot of hundreds of books left unattended. Ecks closed the door and joined her in the vestibule.

All around them, shelves had fallen into disrepair, most of them falling over to rest on the shelving stack closest to them, causing a domino effect of rows of tilted shelves leaning on the next one down the line along one wall.

"What is this place?" Terri asked.

Ecks glanced around him. He seemed tense.

"It's the safest place in this part of the city. It's also where the Oracle has set up shop."

She peered into the faint light that streamed through the ruddy windows.

“Where do we find him?”

“We don’t. We wait here until…”

A voice boomed from the darkness deep inside the library. “Who dares enter my sanctuary?”

Ecks faced the direction of the voice. “Great Oracle, it is I, Juan. I have brought you the girl. The one that the agents are after.”

A tall man in a long flowing cloak, stepped forward into a stream of light, seeming to appear out of nowhere. Terri squinted to see him better, but his face was shrouded in shadow. “Where is the boy?”

Ecks stood perfectly still as he answered.

“The agents took him, great Oracle.”

“Find him,” the Oracle said. “She is of no use to us alone.”

Terri took a step forward to ask him why he was looking for her and Max, but was stopped short when Ecks grabbed her arm. At that same moment, several men with spears appeared from out of the shadows and surrounded them.

Ecks held her arm firmly. “You must excuse my guest. She does not know your customs.”

The Oracle looked at his warriors and nodded slightly. They raised their spears and stood at attention, ready in case she made another faux pas.

The Oracle regarded her briefly before looking at Ecks. “Why have you brought her to me without the other?”

Ecks licked his lips and swallowed nervously.

“I just thought…”

The Oracle raised his arm, silencing Ecks. “I have already provided you the answers you seek And yet, you do not follow my instructions. We cannot risk the agents finding this place. Your actions have endangered everyone here, and there is no time to establish a new location before the event.”

Terri was about to ask what event when someone rushed into the library from the side and walked briskly up to the Oracle, whispering into his ear. The Oracle looked coolly at Ecks as he listened.

The man stepped back and the Oracle stood up straight, looking down at Ecks like a parent would look at their child caught with their hand in the cookie jar. “It appears the punishment is swift for your actions. My sentries report that agents are already in several locations in this part of the city. That is not a coincidence.”

Ecks shook his head and pleaded, “We weren’t followed. I was careful.”

“You were not careful enough. If there is any hope for escape, for any of us, we must find a new place to hide quickly so we can prepare for the event.”

Terri couldn’t stay silent any longer. “What event?”

The Oracle pointed at her. “Take her with you. And do not return to me until you have both of them. But your time is short. You must hurry.”

The Oracle stepped backward and faded into the shadows along with the rest of the warriors around them.

Ecks grabbed her arm. “We have to go.”

She refused to move and pulled her arm from his hold. “What is he talking about? What is going to happen? What is the event?”

Ecks placed a hand on her back and pushed her softly to get her moving. “When he says we must leave, we must leave.”

She twisted away from his touch and then looked above the

entrance to the library. She stopped and gaped at the wall above the doors.

The missing faded red letters from the sign outside were fixed to the wall. They spelled out the word “RUBRIC” in haphazard fashion. She spun around and looked at Ecks. “What is that?”

Ecks didn’t look to where she pointed, but was trying to guide her out the doors. “We have to leave.”

She planted her feet firmly on the ground and refused to move. “What does that mean?” she said again.

He looked up. “It’s an archaic term for decorative text that was penned in red ink in medieval documents. It served as instructions for the use of that text. It was the first instance of what we now consider metadata.”

She looked at the word again. “Why did they put that there?”

Ecks placed his hands on her shoulders and tried to guide her out the door. “The Oracle believes that the metadata within our code is the secret to escaping this digital prison.”

She spun away and faced him. “What is the event he was talking about? Is he trying to figure out how to leave?”

Ecks looked around him uneasily before focusing back on her. “If I promise to tell you, can we go?”

She nodded.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her out the front door into the dingy street. Once they were outside, he kept her hand in his and dragged her down the street with him. They kept taking one corner after another without stopping until they had left the library far behind them.

He was acting like they were being chased, but every time she looked back, she never saw anyone following them. Nobody was paying attention to them. They were on the run with no one in pursuit.

She finally had enough and pulled her hand from his and stopped on the sidewalk. He spun around and reached for her hand. “We have to keep going.”

She pulled away. “I’m not going any further until you tell me what the event is.”

He looked around before facing her and letting out an exasperated breath. “The event is…”

He stopped talking and his eyes focused over her shoulder. They suddenly grew wide and terror registered on his face. She glanced back and saw what had shocked Ecks into silence.

An agent stood at the other end of the block.

And he was looking right at them.

In slow motion, Ecks pulled twin pistols from under his overcoat and aimed at the agent.

He fired, the guns exploding like twin cannons.

People all around the street screamed in panic and ran for cover. The agent went down at the far end of the block, only to be replaced by two more agents who rushed around the corner, ignoring their fallen comrade as they immediately headed for Ecks and Terri.

Ecks grabbed her and they ran down the street, the agents in hot pursuit.

He rounded the next corner and skidded to a halt. “Keep going. I’ll stop them.”

She glanced around at the unfamiliar streets. “Go where?”

He pointed in a direction. “That way. Go. I’ll catch up.”

She gave him a confused look. “I don’t know where I am.”

“Just go that way. I’ll find you.”

An agent rounded the corner at the far end of the building. Ecks sighted down his barrels and fired, the agent ducking away. “Go!” he yelled over his shoulder.

She bolted in the direction he had indicated, not sure of where to go, but knowing that anywhere had to be better than here.

Chapter 10

Max shut off the hover bike and it settled into the reserved parking space behind the single-story building. He hopped off the bike and walked into Pizza Place, only to come face-to-face with Cesar, the morning weekday shift manager; a pimply-faced teenager with braces who stood several inches shorter than Max.

Cesar made a big show of looking at his watch. “How nice of you to join us, Maximillian.”

Max hated it when Cesar called him by his full name, but he wasn’t going to give this kid the satisfaction of being pulled into his cleverly baited trap. “I’m only a few minutes late, Cesar. Besides, there was a fire and the traffic grid was diverted around the smoke.”

Max walked past him and into the employee area. Cesar followed him like a little lost puppy, “That’s Mr. Falkner to you, Maximillian.”

Max gave him a withering look as he took off his riding jacket and put on the bright red Pizza Place uniform jacket. “You’re only a couple months older than me, Cesar. I don’t think that entitles you to the title of mister just yet.”

Cesar squinted at him. “But that remark does entitle you to another demerit…” Cesar said his name again, emphasizing it with a nasally sneer. “Maximillian.”

Max gritted his teeth as he took a long breath and let it out just as slowly. He wasn’t going to let this little weasel goad him into reacting. The job simply wasn’t worth it.

“I’m going to let it slide this time,” Cesar continued. “Surprisingly, I have an early morning delivery that is outside the traffic grid. I would much rather have Dan or Steve take this one, but since you are the only one in this early, I have no choice.” He held up a small plastic card with the Pizza Place logo on it. “One more demerit and I can’t legally let you use the company override

card."

Max's heart rate sped up with anticipation. His first delivery off the grid. He was going to get the chance to drive the hover bike on his own. He had never done that before. He did quite well during hover school, continually scoring at the top of his Driver's Education class in the training simulators. But this was his first chance to drive a real hover bike; in the real world.

He eagerly reached for the card, but Cesar pulled it quickly away. "This is an important delivery for a very important client. Believe me, if I had anyone else available to do it…"

Cesar let the end of his sentence hang in the air unfinished. Max leaned forward and snatched the card from him. "Don't worry, Cesar. I'll take it easy."

"You better. That hover bike is Pizza Place property. It's only on loan to you while you are employed with us. You no worky, you no havey. Got it?"

Max rolled his eyes and looked down at this kid who was treating him like a child. "Yeah. I got it."

Cesar stomped off, leaving Max staring at the traffic grid override card in his hand. With this card, he could turn off the auto-navigator and drive on his own. It would turn when he wanted it to turn. It would go as fast as he wanted it to go.

He swung by the food warmers and grabbed the delivery order.

Today was shaping up to be a grand day.

He strapped the pizza warmer on the back of his bike and hopped on, firing up the hover engine. The bike rose to its pre-determined height and waited for him to enter in the destination.

Not this time, thought Max.

He slid the card into the slot on the navigator and the screen flashed its red warning message about driver safety, rules of the airway, and other needless information. He was the top in his class.

He knew the rules backwards and forwards. He wasn't going to risk his adult license by breaking them on a stupid pizza delivery.

He tapped in the address and the screen showed his route, highlighting the most efficient pathway. But instead of shooting off to take him where he wanted to go, the bike patiently waited for him to work the controls.

Max smiled to himself as the bike responded to his slow twist of the throttle and moved forward toward the street. He glanced both ways down the road to make sure it was clear before he pulled out on his first self-controlled ride.

He glided down the street at the mandatory two feet above the ground. Unfortunately, the override card was pre-set for the ground level, so he wouldn't be taking off into the sky anytime soon. Still, it was better than just being a passenger.

He was the master of his own destiny.

Well, at the very least, he was the master of his own destination.

Even though he was checking his rear view mirror as he drove carefully down the road, he failed to notice the same black limousine start up and continue to follow him.

Chapter 11

Terri kept running at full speed, her lungs burning from the brutal pace. She took corners at random and was soon lost in an area of the city that was even dirtier than the dilapidated library the Oracle called home.

She still didn't know what event they were talking about, and now she had become separated from Ecks, right before he was about to explain.

He also hadn't told her how to find Max. There were many things Ecks failed to elaborate. Things he had promised to tell her. She had to find that library again. If the Oracle was someone sent in by Chester, he might know more about how to find Max, how to find Thomas, and how to get out of this game.

She stopped running and looked around at the unfamiliar city. She hadn't been paying attention which way she had run, and was even more lost than before. An old man sat on a bench across the street, possibly waiting for a bus.

She checked both ways, crossed the street, and approached the old man with a smile.

"Excuse me," she said brightly.

He looked up at her and returned her smile.

"What can I help you with, Miss?"

She looked up and down the street. "I seem to have gotten turned around. I'm looking for the old public library. Do you know how to get there?"

He frowned. "That closed down."

Relief washed over her. He knew about the library. "Yes. But I'm meeting a friend on the corner where the library is. Can you help me find it?"

The man eyed her silently before pointing to her left. “Go ten blocks that way and turn right. It will be another five blocks across the street.”

It was close. She suddenly realized she must have been running in circles. “Thank you!” she shot over her shoulder as she headed in the direction the man had indicated.

She didn’t look back at him as she headed down the street. If she had, she would have seen that he lifted a device to his mouth and spoke into it as his eyes followed her.

Chapter 12

Chester sat at his workstation and angled his body so that the security camera behind him couldn't see what was on his screen. He typed swiftly as he launched the tracer program into the video network.

He had received an alert that someone had tapped into the security system and was accessing the cameras in the base. Chester knew immediately who it had to be. If 1X was watching him, then that was the one mistake Chester had been waiting for. He would follow the signal all the way back to where 1X was hiding; and take the fight to him. "Then we will see who is winning," Chester said quietly to himself. As soon as he was done, he cleared his screen and returned to work looking for Max and Terri in ROBLOX. He glanced over at their physical bodies for a moment before returning to his task at hand. This was their last chance. He knew time was quickly running out, and he would have to act.

He called up the message SETI had received a year before that had started everything in motion. The only other message from space that was ever received by Earth was a shorter message than the one that bore Thomas in 1977, but what it didn't say sent everyone into a frenzy. He read it again, despite having memorized it the first time he read it a year before.

"We received notification that Thomas has been activated. Your technology has advanced to the level where you may now follow the instructions included with his code. Have him ready in one revolution of your planet around your star. We are coming."

Chapter 13

Max came to the edge of the traffic grid and his navigation screen beeped a warning. He ignored it and gunned the throttle. The hover bike crossed the outer threshold of the grid and he was fully in control.

He smiled to himself as he made his way down the streets along the outer edge of the city. Here, the streets were so cracked and pitted that only hover vehicles could travel them. The windows on most of the buildings were shattered or boarded up.

The people that milled along the dirty sidewalks all scuffled along as if their lives had lost all meaning.

He had never been to this part of the city before, and quickly began to wonder if anyone here could afford to pay for delivered pizza, let alone have extra left over for a tip.

He glanced at the navigation screen and was relieved that it still showed he was getting closer to his destination. He really didn't want to spend any amount of time this far off the grid than was absolutely necessary.

As he turned the next corner, he glanced back and a glimmer of recognition sparked in his brain. He thought he saw the same limousine that had left the airway lane back in the center of the city. What was something that cost more than most homes in this part of the city doing here? And what were the odds that they had both come to the same part of the city at the same time?

He took the next corner and his navigation computer beeped, warning him that he had ventured off the displayed route. Within seconds it recalculated and showed him the new route to take through the city to reach his destination.

He glanced back to see the limo taking the same corner he had. He took the next corner, the navigation computer beeping louder as it was forced to recalculate a new route again.

He watched over his shoulder as the limo turned onto the same street behind him.

That settled it.

It was following him.

Max twisted the throttle and shot forward, the navigation computer beeping loudly at him for exceeding the speed limit; and missing the next turn.

He glanced back and his heart jumped into his throat. The limousine was accelerating to catch up with him; all pretense that it might not be following him suddenly vanished.

He leaned to one side and rounded the next corner at high speed, narrowly missing a garbage truck as it loaded cans into the top chute with a mechanical arm.

“Hey! Watch it!” the driver yelled out the side window as Max rocketed past him.

Max looked back to see the limo taking the turn wide to avoid the parked truck. Max took several turns, but the limo stayed right behind him, and seemed to be gaining.

Max’s hover bike was the economy version that favored conservative fuel cell use over speed and performance. Glancing back, he could see the vents along the side of the hover limo that were used to shed the excess heat generated by a fusion drive that favored speed and performance over conservative fuel use.

He wasn’t going to be getting away from that limo on this sorry excuse for a powered vehicle. It was little more than one step above a grounder’s pedal bike.

He held the throttle fully open, but it was no use. Every time he looked back, the limo had gained on him. The only time he changed that was when he took a corner. He could lean into the turn and keep up his speed, but the limo had to slow down before each turn or risk crashing into the side of a building.

All he had to do was take the turns faster. and he might be able to lose his tail.

His wrist was starting to hurt as he kept the throttle twisted down. He took the next corner a little too wide and swept over the edge of the sidewalk. Quickly shifting his weight to hang over the edge of the bike, he angled it enough to use the hover pads to skim along the side of the building, the default hover settings keeping him from hitting the alternating cement and glass walls.

Rocketing to the end of the building, he shifted his weight again and dropped back into an upright hovering position two feet above the sidewalk and honked his horn repeatedly, sending pedestrians scattering before him as he rocketed past them and back out into the street.

A quick glance behind him confirmed that the limo was still keeping pace with him. It too had taken the turn wide and the pedestrians, who had just recovered from Max's crazy antics, were scattering again to keep away from the speeding limousine.

He was so focused on the limo behind him, he failed to see what was happening in front of him. His hover bike hit the top of a fence with the warning sign that said that the street was closed for repairs.

The impact knocked him off the bike and he flew dozens of feet through the air before landing in a large mound of soft dirt. At the same moment his hover bike disappeared with a clattering sound into a trench below him.

Max tumbled out of control down the mound of dirt and landed in the ditch with a painful thud. His bike was lying on its side several feet ahead of him.

He got to his feet quickly and ran to his bike. He lifted it upright and checked it over to confirm nothing had been broken. It turned on when he pressed the power switch.

He breathed a sigh of relief, but then sucked it back in quickly when the fence exploded inward; the limo crashing through it

without stopping.

He jumped on the bike and twisted the throttle. The bike rose two feet in the air and shot forward, but the trench was too deep for the pre-programmed hovering height to allow him to just rise up out of it and escape. He could only accelerate down the trench and hope there was a way out before he reached the end.

The limo raced up behind him. He glanced over his shoulder, his vision filled by the front grill of the limousine as it bore down on him. A sharp stabbing pain shot through his wrist as he tried to twist the throttle beyond its full speed. The shadow of the limo overtook his own in the ditch and he felt the pressure of the bumper coming in right behind him.

He ducked low, hugging the bike just as the limo went over him; and slowed to stay above him.

He looked forward and saw what the driver of the limo had probably already seen. The ditch ended abruptly in a wall rather than the slow ramp Max was hoping for.

If Max kept going at this speed, he would slam into the wall of dirt and that would be the end of him. He twisted his head and looked at the bottom of the limo racing along the top of the ditch only inches above him.

Max hit the brake and the bike shuddered to a halt as the limo passed overhead.

Max switched to reverse and took off in the other direction. He knew from his fall that the other end had a gradual ramp of dirt leading down into the trench. If he could beat the limo to the other end, he might be able to get out before it was too late.

He raced down the trench, the wall shooting by in a blur. The bike was harder to control in reverse and he wavered from side to side, hitting the trench walls a couple of times and leaving shallow gouges in the packed dirt. As he neared the ramp, he hazarded a glance at the limo. It was back; and it was getting closer.

He craned his neck back over his shoulder and looked at the slope that was coming in fast and would take him out of the trench. Then he looked back to see that the limo was coming in faster.

At their rates of speed, he wouldn't make it!

The ground started to slope up just as the limo's shadow caught up with his. Max had a split second to decide what to do.

He hugged the bike and hit the brakes. The bike slowed suddenly; the limo shooting past him overhead.

He sat back up and twisted the throttle to full speed again. The bike shot up the dirt ramp and out of the trench behind the limousine. He angled the bike in the air, shifting the gear back to forward as he spun through the air. He turned the first corner at the same moment the limo driver skidded out of control and slammed into the side of a building. Glass shattered and pieces of cement crumbled to the ground as the limo backed out of the impact zone and continued its pursuit.

Max turned into a back alley, narrowly dodging the trash bins that littered either side. He heard crashing behind him. A quick glance confirmed that the limo had followed and was angrily smashing trash bins out its way as it pursued him.

Up ahead, the cross traffic was stopped in the middle of the street. Several cars hovered silently, waiting for the traffic to clear. Despite being able to fly at any height, every vehicle, including Max and the speeding limo behind him, were floating two feet above the ground; under constant control of the navigation computers.

If there was ever a time Max wished he could override the hover-height requirement, and fly over the stopped traffic, this was it.

Max nearly fell off the bike when it bucked under him and he tightened his grip on the handlebars. He glanced behind him just as the limo surged forward and slammed into the back of his hover bike again, sending it wobbling dangerously through the air.

The limo backed off and then lurched forward to hit the bike

again, shattering the center tail light and nearly knocking Max off.

He wavered back and forth in front of the limo, getting closer to the stopped traffic ahead. If he slowed down or tried to turn around, the limo would ram him into oblivion. If he kept going at his current speed, he would slam into the cross traffic.

There was nowhere for him to go.

Just then, crazy inspiration hit him.

He slowed down, hanging on for dear life as the limo rammed him again. He waited until the limo dropped back again and then gunned the engine.

His bike shot forward straight at the cars stopped in the road ahead. Just before he impacted, he thumbed the power switch, shutting off the hover bike's engine.

Max stood up on the seat and jumped into the air. As he flew over the car in the first lane, the hover bike dropped to the ground, both of them missing the car; one above and one below.

The car in the next lane was not so lucky.

He landed on the hood with a thud, leaving a massive dent, and kept rolling to fall off the other side to the ground.

He hit the pavement, wrenching his shoulder, and tumbled out of control under the stopped cars in the rest of the lanes. His bike skidded across the pavement next to him. leaving a trail of sparks that rebounded off the smooth bottoms of the cars.

Both he and his bike hit the curb at the same time and stopped suddenly. He looked up in time to see the limousine crash into the cars in the first lane, the impact shoving them into cars in the next lanes over.

The limo flew over Max's head and crashed through the building, leaving a limousine shaped hole in the wall.

Max rolled to his hands and knees, every joint and muscle

screaming at him to stop moving. He ignored them and lifted his hover bike into a standing position. One whole side of it was scraped and eroded. The plastic slider that was designed to absorb most of the impact before damage reached the engine block had been stripped away.

He held the bike upright on the sidewalk and thumbed the power switch. Thankfully, the slider had done its job and the bike lifted a couple inches, humming softly as it waited for him to climb on the seat.

Noise behind him drew his attention. He glanced back to see the limo driver climbing through the hole in the wall. He looked at Max and reached into his jacket.

Max turned away and hopped on the hover bike, not bothering to see what the driver was reaching for, and twisted the throttle. The bike responded instantly and he shot forward, narrowly avoiding the blast that took out the window of the building next to him.

Max glanced back to see the driver stumbling onto the sidewalk.

Max looked frantically around him for a side street… or an alley… or anything. He wouldn't be able to get to the end of the block before the driver fired again. He had to think quickly.

He saw an open door, and drove into the main hallway of an apartment building.

The navigation computer beeped loudly at him and dropped down to hover inches from the floor and slowed to a snail's crawl no matter how hard he twisted the throttle.

He glanced at the screen. It was flashing red and warned him to return to the road or it would shut down the engine in twenty seconds.

The bike came to a stop.

He twisted the throttle, but it refused to move further into the apartment complex. Max hopped off, grabbed the seat, and manually pushed it down the hallway toward the elevator doors at

the other end. The bike glided easily as he stumbled down the hall, trying not to step on the dangling bits of plastic and metal from the damaged bike.

He reached the elevator and hit the button repeatedly. He knew if the limo driver saw him go in here, he would be after him. As he waited for the doors to open, he watched the other end of the hallway intently.

The doors hissed open with a ding and Max struggled to push the bike into the tiny elevator car. Just as he wrestled the entire bike in at an angle, and hit the top floor button, the driver appeared in the doorway.

He spotted Max and raised his gun to fire as the doors started to close. The bullet tore a hole in the wall behind Max's head. Two more bullets dented the closing doors.

The elevator shot upward toward the top floor. Max breathed a sigh of relief. He just might get away this time. But it all depended on how well the bike's emergency systems were still functioning.

The doors dinged and slid open. Max shoved the bike ahead of him onto the small path that wound its way through the large rooftop park, complete with low rolling hills and a small lake.

He made his way to the edge of the building and hefted the bike over the railing. He climbed over and stood next to it, looking out over the sprawling city that loomed hundreds of stories below.

What he was about to do was dangerous enough with a fully operational bike. But to try it with one that had been beaten, smashed, and sent through the virtual wringer? That was another thing altogether.

If this didn't work, he would be nothing more than a grease stain on the street below. There would be nothing left to identify who he used to be. He shuddered at that thought. "This will just have to work then," he said out loud, his heart thudding against his ribs, hoping to give himself enough courage to go through with it.

The elevator dinged again and he looked back as the doors slid open and the driver stepped out with his gun raised. He glanced quickly around the roof; looking for Max.

Their eyes met and Max stepped off the ledge, pulling the hover bike over with him.

He hadn't had time to climb on the bike properly, so he clung with all his might to the handlebars as he fell and waited for the safety systems to kick in.

The hover bike responded immediately to the danger of falling and reoriented itself, yanking the handlebars right out of his hands.

The bike slowed its descent and stopped to hover tranquilly in the middle of the air. But Max was not so lucky. He was still falling, with more than seventy stories to go before the ground greeted his arrival.

Chapter 14

Terri stepped through the library entrance and peered into the hazy darkness. She had found the library with the old man's directions. She hoped that she wasn't too late and that someone was still here.

She had to find out what the event was.

As ominous as it sounded, Chester must know about it. Why hadn't Chester mentioned it to Max or herself? And speaking of Max, she had to find him too. With nowhere else to turn, she decided consulting with someone who called himself an oracle might not be a bad thing.

"Hello?" she said into the empty library.

A scuffling sound came from her right and she squinted, trying to see if anyone was there or if it was her imagination. Her spine shivered as she felt like she was being watched even though she couldn't see anyone.

She knew that it was now or never.

"I have a question," she said out loud and then pointed at the letters mounted to the wall just below the ceiling. "What does that mean? Why did you remove those letters from outside and put them there?"

Her answer was silence.

"What's the metadata you are referring to?" she called out into the emptiness. "And what is the event?"

She jumped a foot in the air as a voice answered from directly behind her. "Why do you want to know what the event is?"

She spun around and found herself face-to-face with the Oracle who was only a few feet away from her. How had he gotten so close without her hearing him?

“Do you know why I am here?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Then tell me,” she prodded.

The Oracle looked her up and down. “You are here to stop the event.”

Her mind raced, trying to remember everything Chester had told her before strapping her and Max into the extractors and sending her consciousness into a computer generated world.

Into ROBLOX itself.

“Is the event when the aliens plan to launch the missiles and destroy Earth?”

The Oracle’s eyes went dark and he turned away. “You know nothing.”

She ran quickly to get in front of him. “Then tell me.”

He looked at her, the sorrow deep set into his eyes. “I have lived too many lives to waste my time trying to explain it to a child.”

He started to walk around her, but she stepped in his way and stopped him. “I may be considered a child out there. But in here, I am anything but.”

The Oracle looked down at her. “Let me pass, child.”

She stood rigid and crossed her arms. “No. Not until you tell me what I want to know.”

“What is it you want to know?”

“What is the event?”

“That is not what you want to know.”

She frowned. Why was it that everyone who called themselves an oracle always spoke in riddles? She lunged forward and grabbed

him by the lapels of his cloak and slammed him into the wall. Dust exploded around him like a cartoon character hitting the ground after a long fall.

“What is the event?” she said through gritted teeth.

The Oracle’s eyes darted to look past her for a moment before they refocused on her. “I suggest you let me go or…”

“Or what?” she said quickly, interrupting him.

“Or my men will destroy you,” he replied.

She glanced behind her, eyes widening as she saw that several men with spears had already surrounded her. Either she was not paying enough attention, or they moved silently. She hadn’t heard any of them approach.

She looked back at the Oracle. “Go ahead. We’ll just keep doing this until you tell me what I want to know.”

The Oracle’s face shifted to confusion. “You do not fear death?”

“Why should I? It’s not death I should be worried about in here.”

“True. But are you willing to risk your sanity after you have died a few more times?”

“I’ll die however many times it takes to do what I came here to do.”

The Oracle nodded slightly and she felt the rush of air despite not hearing any noise. She flinched and closed her eyes tightly, readying herself for the pain of spears piercing her body and sending her back to the spawn point. She hoped that she only went a little bit crazy when she came back.

When nothing happened, she opened her eyes again and looked at the Oracle. He was smiling at her. She looked around to see that the warriors had all disappeared into the dark recesses of the library. She had no doubt they were still close by, but for now they gave the appearance of leaving her alone with the Oracle.

She released him and took a step back. He pushed away from the wall with an elbow and dusted himself off. “Congratulations, Terri. You have passed the test.”

She frowned. “Test? What test?”

“Your resolve. I wanted to know how willing you were to discover the truth. Chester has finally chosen wisely.”

“Chosen what now?”

He smiled. “Where is your companion?”

“Companion? You mean Max?”

He nodded.

She looked around the library, as if Max would suddenly appear next to her. “I don’t know. The agents took him and re-programmed him.”

He nodded again. “That is unfortunate. We must find him before the event.”

“You have to tell me,” she insisted. “What is the event?”

“The event is…”

The explosion cut him off and sent them both flying in opposite directions as the library ceiling collapsed around them. A shelving unit filled with old books broke free from the wall and fell onto her, burying her alive.

Chapter 15

Max's hair fluttered in the wind as he hurtled toward the ground. Maybe he should have let whoever was after him catch him. Maybe he would have had a better chance at surviving for another day with a gun wielding maniac than by jumping off a hundred-story building.

In these last few moments of his existence, he didn't think about his family or what he still had left to do with his life.

No. It was nothing so profound.

Instead, he thought about what that pimply-faced Cesar would say when he saw the damage to the hover bike.

He knew exactly what he would say.

As the ground rushed up to meet Max, all he could do was laugh at the absurdity of how Cesar would react to the destruction of company property.

He closed his eyes and envisioned himself back on the roof, lying on a low hill next to the lake to bask in the warm sun.

His fantasy was so complete, he didn't notice the high pitched whine of a hover bike swooping in toward him from the side.

He didn't really register what was happening until he felt the bite of the ropes pulling on his skin as his acceleration changed and his direction shifted sideways.

His eyes popped open and he looked up at the smiling face of a man who had caught him in the net he was pulling behind his high performance hover bike.

The man swooped down and slowly landed. Max lay perfectly still as the man pulled him out of the net and stood him up, smiling at him.

"That was a close one, Max."

Max frowned at him. “Do I know you?”

The man kept his easy smile. “Not yet. But I know you, well, at least, I know about you.” He stood up straight and stuck his hand out for Max to shake it. “The name’s Ecks.”

Max shook his hand and looked up into the sky. Then he looked down at his feet firmly planted on solid ground before returning his gaze to Ecks and pulling his hand away. “Thank you for saving my life, Ecks. I guess I owe you one.”

The man chuckled. “You could start by helping me find Terri again. I seem to have lost her. Boy, I can’t seem to keep track of both of you at the same time.”

Max scrunched his face up in confusion. “Who?”

Ecks looked Max up and down. “Terri. Your friend from,” he pointed to the sky. “Out there.”

Max looked up. “Out there?”

Ecks slapped his forehead with a palm. “Oh, that’s right. Where is my head? You’ve been re-written. You don’t remember anything before this morning I bet.”

“No,” Max replied. “I remember plenty of stuff. Look, I should be going…”

Ecks grabbed his arm. “What you remember is only data points. They are not memories you lived and experienced. They were written to give you some sense of history so that you felt like this wasn’t the first day of your life; nothing more.”

Max pulled his arm free. This guy was talking crazy and he had to get away before the limo driver realized he wasn’t dead. “Look. Thanks for saving me, but I really need to be going.”

Ecks moved in close and placed his hands on Max’s shoulders, holding him in place. “Don’t worry, Max. I know what you might be thinking, but you are perfectly safe with me. More importantly, there is someone you need to meet.”

Max stared into Ecks' eyes. He didn't see anything sinister in them. If he was going to trust someone, it might as well be this guy. "I'm sorry… What was your name?"

Ecks took a step back and bowed with a flourish. "Ecks. Detective Juan Ecks, at your service."

"Well, Detective Ecks, what I really need right now is to get out of here."

Ecks waggled a finger at him. "No. I need to take you to the Oracle. Just as soon as I find your friend."

Max glanced down the street and saw the limo driver exit the building and look at them. He guided Ecks to his hover bike. "Great. Take me to see the Oracle. Can we leave right now?"

Ecks looked befuddled. "I have to find your friend first."

Max looked down the street. The driver was running in their direction. Max had to get Ecks moving, and fast.

He hopped on the back of the bike. "Great. Let's find my friend," he said despite not knowing who this crackpot was talking about.

Ecks climbed on and started up the bike, rising into the air. Max looked down the street and, as they zipped away through the air, saluted the driver with a smile as he got away.

Max didn't care who it was who had been trying to kill him. As soon as he got home, he would call the police and report it. They should be able to figure out who he was based on the destroyed hover car left inside a building.

But before that could happen, Max had to figure out how to get away from Ecks.

Max's elation was temporary as he realized that the limo driver might not be working alone. Max scanned the skies around them as they traveled back over the decaying part of the city.

Ecks was going slower, watching the road below as if he was

looking for something; or someone.

Max mindlessly watched the road passing by below and wondered what he had gotten himself into. And if there was any way to get himself back out of it.

Chapter 16

Terri woke up with a start, choking on the dust in the air. She pushed up on the debris that pressed down on her and found it moved easily.

She climbed out from under piles of old books and broken shelves. She looked around in the smoky haze. “Oracle?”

When there was no response, she picked her way carefully through the piles of debris toward the entrance. Only one side of the library had collapsed, and she could see the doors opening as someone forced their way inside.

She couldn’t make out who stood in the doorway, as they were silhouetted against the light. But it didn’t matter, she needed help. “Over here,” she called.

The shadow darted into the library and scooped her up, carrying her out into the street.

He set her down and she finally got a look at his face and her heart fluttered. “Max!”

Max stared at her. “How do you know my name?”

Terri stood up shakily, her whole body feeling bruised after being tossed around inside the library at the moment of the explosion.

“It’s me, Terri. How did you find me?”

Max pointed behind her. She looked and saw Ecks scanning the buildings around them through the scope of a high powered rifle. He looked at her and smiled. “Glad we found you. Whoever blew up the building is gone. Where is the Oracle?”

Terri pointed into the collapsed library. “He was in there with me when the whole place blew up.”

Ecks’ head snapped to look at the remains of the library. He dropped the rifle and ran into the library. “Oracle!” he shouted.

“Can you hear me?”

His voice became muffled as he ventured further into the still smoldering library, looking for the Oracle among the rubble.

Max looked at Terri. “What was that about?”

Terri gave him the strangest look. “Do you remember me?”

Max shook his head. “No. Should I?”

Terri fought back the tears that threatened to burst. “We are best friends.”

“We are?”

“Ever since kindergarten.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “You grew up in Serpa?”

She shook her head. “No, Max,” she said sadly and then held her arms wide to encompass the city around her. “None of this is real.”

Max looked at her like she was crazy. “If you say so.”

She had to do something to help him remember who he was, who she was, and why they were here.

Ecks scrambled out of the library, coughing away the smoke. “He’s not in there. It looks like he got out before the whole place came down.”

Terri looked at the destroyed library. “Where do you think he went?”

“I have a few ideas. We’ll find him again before the event.”

Terri’s mouth fell open. “Do you know what the event is?”

Max looked to the sky. “Do you know what that sound is?”

Once he said it, Terri heard the hissing sound getting closer. Ecks was the first to react and dove for them, taking all three of them to

the ground as something streaked overhead, leaving a trail of white smoke, and impacted with what remained of the library.

The explosion propelled the three of them across the street. Terri tried to keep her arms and legs tucked in to keep from breaking anything as she somersaulted along the ground.

She stopped on her back, her ears ringing from the deafening explosion. The only sound she heard was her own breathing as she gasped for air.

Looking up at the sky, another trail of smoke streaked overhead. Her vision was suddenly blocked by Ecks who reached down to pick her up. Max was next to him and they started running away.

She tried to make out what he was saying, but every sound around her was muffled, like she was at the other end of a long tunnel under water.

Ecks had carried her only a couple feet when the next explosion knocked him over. He clung to Terri and absorbed most of the fall with his own body as they tumbled forward with the shockwave.

Max was the first back to his feet. He helped Terri up and looked at Ecks still crouched on the ground. “We have to get out of here.”

Ecks pushed himself up to a standing position. “I know where to…” but he started wobbling unsteadily and his eyes rolled back up into his head.

He crumpled to the ground; unconscious.

Max grabbed Ecks’ arms and looked at Terri. “Grab his feet.”

She lifted Ecks’ feet and stared at Max.

“What are we doing?”

“We have to find somewhere safe away from…” Before he finished his sentence, another rocket streamed in and detonated, taking out the last of the library.

They stumbled, but stayed standing.

Terri glanced around at the debris raining down on them. A shadow swept over them and circled around the street. Max started moving quickly and she nearly dropped Ecks' feet as she struggled to keep up with him.

He raced them to the sheltered doorway of a building down the street from the demolished library. Once in the alcove, Terri glanced up to see a large black armored hover car floating around the devastation.

Max pulled her back out of sight as the car lowered to land among the rubble in the street. The rear doors opened and several identical agents spilled out into the street and rushed into the still burning debris.

Terri saw that each agent had a large weapon in their hands. She looked at Ecks lying unconscious at their feet before looking at Max.

His face said it all. "What do we do now?" he asked.

Terri was about to answer that she had no idea when she saw movement in the middle of the street. Her mouth fell open in surprise when a manhole cover slid open and a man in a scraggly beard, and wearing several coats, climbed out.

He surveyed the damage and then spotted Terri. He smiled, his grin revealing rotting teeth. Well, at least the ones not missing were rotting.

He rushed over and looked down at Ecks, removed two of his dingy coats and tossed one to Max and the other to Terri. "Put those on and follow me," the homeless man said as he turned back toward the open manhole cover.

Max stepped forward. "Wait. I need to get back to the center of…"

The homeless man spun around and put his hand up to silence him. "You need to put your coat on and come with me, Max."

Max's mouth fell open and he looked at Terri, fear written in his eyes. "How come everyone already knows my name?"

Terri wasn't as shocked that this man knew Max's name. He probably also knew hers as well. There seemed to be a strong and active underground headed by the mysterious Oracle. But was this man a part of that or something different?

She pointed at Ecks, lying still on the ground. "What about him?"

The man glanced at Ecks. "Leave him. The Oracle is waiting and there is no time to waste."

Terri's heart rate sped up. "He survived?"

The man grew somber. "The man you spoke with did not survive. But he was only the speaker for the Oracle. The Oracle is a little… harder to talk with directly."

"Hey you!" a voice shouted from down the street. Terri looked to see one of the agents had noticed them at the other end of the block.

The man ignored him and whispered urgently to Max and Terri. "Put the coats on. Now!"

"Hey! I'm talking to you!" the agent said again.

Terri donned her coat while Max just stared at his.

The agent stopped and gawked at Terri for a moment before he yelled loudly as he raised his weapon. "Target acquired!"

The agent fired, a laser bolt shooting from his gun and slamming into Max's coat, knocking him back into the alcove.

The homeless man produced his own weapon and fired several laser bolts back at the agent, hitting him squarely in the chest. The agent dissolved with a scream, but more agents came running from the remnants of the library and started firing at the homeless man. He ducked down, his dingy coat deflecting the laser bolts into the surrounding buildings.

Max watched the bolts ricochet off the homeless man's coat and he quickly shoved his arms through the sleeves. "Why is this happening to me?!"

The homeless man pointed at the open manhole. "That way!" he yelled and fired back at the advancing agents, hitting one of them.

"Come on," Terri yelled and pulled Max into the street while laser bolts impacted the ground around them. Every few shots, she felt a bolt bounce off her coat. She didn't bother wondering how they were able to deflect the laser blasts, she was only glad that they did.

She ran up to the edge of the manhole and looked down into the darkness. Max skidded to a stop next to her. He looked back at the man. "There's no ladder," he said in a panic.

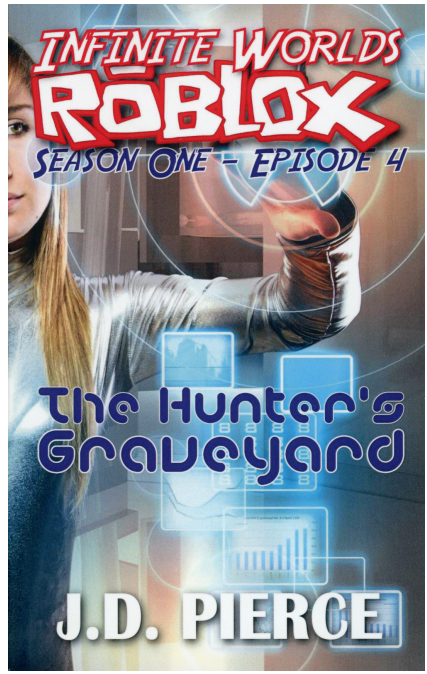
The homeless man pushed them into the hole and then jumped in after them head first as laser bolts exploded above them.

With a startled scream springing forth from both Max and Terri, they fell into blackness.

The Adventure Continues…

Season One - Episode 4

The Hunter's Graveyard



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